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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#) [CY](#)
SUBJECT: TURKISH CYPRIOT OPPOSITION ELECTS HARD-LINE NEW
LEADER

REF: A. NICOSIA 203

[1](#)B. NICOSIA 975
[1](#)C. NICOSIA 1607
[1](#)D. NICOSIA 1691

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher, reasons 1.4 (b and d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The National Unity Party (UBP) has selected Nicosia "MP" and former "TRNC Foreign Minister" Tahsin Ertugruloglu (see bio below) to lead the party, which is the north's second largest political formation and the main Turkish Cypriot opposition group. The comparatively charismatic Ertugruloglu, one of the most hard-line nationalists in the political mainstream, has been waiting for years for his turn to lead the party -- which was thrown out of office in 2003 after nearly three decades in power. The new leader's first task will be to reinvigorate a party that has been ideologically rudderless since backing the losing side in the 2004 Annan referendum, and which (without clear leadership or access to the power of patronage) has been hemorrhaging support since then. Most observers agree that Ertugruloglu's UBP will be a somewhat leaner -- but ideologically more coherent and politically more vigorous -- organization. It is less certain whether the party will be able to mount an effective challenge to the CTP of "PM" Soyer and "President" Talat -- which, despite widespread disillusionment, remains a formidable political juggernaut and continues to enjoy the support of the government of Turkey. END SUMMARY.

YOU'VE TRIED THE REST, NOW TRY... TAHSIN

[1](#)2. (C) At its annual congress on December 16, the main Turkish Cypriot opposition party, UBP, elected long-time nationalist firebrand Tahsin Ertugruloglu as its new leader. Ertugruloglu (who is universally known simply as Tahsin because of this tongue-twisting name: "er-too-rool-OAL-loo") is a Nicosia "MP" and former "TRNC Foreign Minister." Tahsin, who had eyed the party leadership several times in the past, succeeds the UBP's hapless outgoing leader, Huseyin Ozgurgun -- and was elected without opposition in what many observers feel is a last-ditch effort to revive a seriously troubled party.

[1](#)3. (C) The party has never recovered from the body blow it suffered in December 2003 elections, which elevated CTP's Mehmet Ali Talat to the "prime ministry" after 30 years of almost uninterrupted UBP "government." Once in opposition, the UBP was unable to rely on its traditional tools of patronage and intimidation to ensure the loyalty of its members and donors -- many of whom defected after the CTP came to power. At the same time, the party's nationalist stand on the Cyprus question was increasingly out of touch with both Turkish Cypriot public opinion and the policies of the then-new AKP government in Turkey. UBP suffered further

from its decision to back the "no" campaign in the 2004 Annan referendum (where over 60 percent of voters, including some UBP supporters, voted in favor of reunification) and from subsequent party back-pedaling and waffling on the question of reunification.

14. (C) In subsequent "parliamentary" and "presidential" elections in 2005, the UBP's long-time leader, graying former "PM" Dervis Eroglu, proved to be an electoral liability as the party was repeatedly hammered in the polls. Eroglu resigned from the party's top job in November 2005, opening up a year-long leadership struggle between harder-line nationalists, led by the charismatic and assertive Tahsin, and more "moderate" pragmatists led by Ozgurgun. When Ozgurgun took over the reigns in February 2006 (ref a), he was supported by Eroglu as a "new generation" candidate -- but never won the support of the hard-liners, and proved unable to turn his party's sagging fortunes around in June 2006 elections (ref b).

15. (C) When several opportunity-seeking UBP "MPs" and other notables (led by party SYG, now "FM," Turgay Avci) bolted to create the Freedom and Reform Party (OP) and join the CTP-led "government," the party's fortunes sunk to a new low and Ozgurgun resigned in frustration (refs c and d). UBP insiders tell us that a mood of desperation has since gripped those who have remained behind. With the death, defection, or unelectability of all his potential rivals, Tahsin coasted to victory -- by acclamation -- as the what-have-we-got-to-lose candidate.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

16. (C) Like Ozgurgun before him, Tahsin faces an uphill

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struggle. The likelihood of UBP reconciliation with its traditional patron, Turkey, seems slim as long as the AKP remains in power there. The open rift over issues like the recent "TRNC" Property Commission (which the UBP opposed and the GOT supported) has reportedly taken on a bitter and personal flavor -- with UBP politicians confiding to us that their face-to-face meetings with Erdogan, Gul, Saban Disli, and other AKP notables are downright hostile. "They've decided to back CTP," said one UBP insider sadly, "because we kick up too much fuss in defense of TRNC interests." Although the party gets a sympathetic hearing (and reportedly some financial backing) from CHP- and MAP-types on the mainland, he said, "it's not enough."

17. (C) Meanwhile, the UBP remains frozen out of "government" and unable to dole out pork to its supporters. UBP, which had retained considerable strength and patronage powers at the municipal level, has seen its strength in the provinces ebb as well, with a poor showing in June's local elections and the subsequent defection of several rent-seeking mayors and party organizers to the OP and CTP. Overcoming this hemorrhaging of support will be key in such a small, clannish community where voters of all stripes judge politicians primarily on how well they spread favors and money to those who have voted for them.

WHAT ABOUT SERDAR?

18. (C) The UBP's main selling point now, for those not interested in pork, is its ideology. The CTP-DP divorce, along with the subsequent back-room dealing that led to the current CTP-OP coalition, has compounded the public's frustration with the party of Talat and Soyer -- which has a decidedly mixed record on its election promises of Cyprus unification, integration with the EU, democracy, reform, and an end to nepotism. Tahsin now has an ideal bully pulpit to attract frustrated voters with an "I-told-you-so" message.

¶9. (C) The UBP has also put an end, for now at least, to its long and divisive war with the DP of Serdar Denktash. Serdar (thanks to his name recognition and his own ability to dole out pork) had effectively split the right and denied UBP victories in three of the past four elections. But since his ouster from the coalition, Serdar has joined forces with UBP in a boycott of the CTP-dominated "parliament," even going so far as to sit alongside UBP leaders in the public gallery and disrupt legislative proceedings with hoots and cat-calls.

¶10. (C) One CTP insider admitted to us that the possibility of a more durable UBP-DP alliance is "one of the things that scare us most," especially if this alliance can attract more concentrated support from the Turkish "Deep State." Although the CTP-OP's comfortable majority is enough to let them keep passing laws, CTP insiders worry that an extended UBP-DP boycott will undermine the "government's" legitimacy by transforming "parliament" into a rubber stamp -- and at the same time, absolve the nationalist opposition of their share of blame for the Turkish Cypriots' persistent problems.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Tahsin's abrasive personality and unflinching nationalism are why it has taken him so long to get to the altar after being a bridesmaid for so many years. But the mood in the "TRNC" has changed since the 2004 "yes" vote, and many of those moderates, both inside and outside the party, who were initially skeptical of Tahsin may now be tempted to give him a second look. He is not a new face, but he is comparatively young, energetic, and quick on his feet. Even if he cannot win back opportunistic defectors who have left the party in search of jobs and pork, Tahsin stands a good chance of molding the UBP into a more ideologically consistent and energetic -- if leaner -- party. Barring early elections (which would be a gamble for CTP and a disaster for OP on which it relies for its majority), Tahsin will have plenty of time (until the 2010 "parliamentary" and "presidential" polls) to snipe safely from the sidelines and hope that discontent grows.

¶12. (C) Tahsin, however, is still a long way from power. CTP has a formidable grass-roots organization, and its access to the same levers of power that kept UBP in power for so long has made the party an even-greater electoral juggernaut. Tahsin's biggest obstacle, however, may be Serdar. Both men, who dislike each other intensely, aspire to leadership of the right and eventually of the "TRNC." Unless one of them can control his towering ego and agree to play second fiddle, it will be hard for the right to emerge as a credible alternative to the CTP -- either in the eyes of the voters,

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or in the eyes of Ankara. END COMMENT.

BIOGRAPHY OF TAHSIN ERTUGRULOGU

¶13. (C) Tahsin Ertugruloglu was born in Nicosia in 1953, and is universally known in Cyprus simply as "Tahsin." He has a cutting wit and enjoys a good political argument. Tahsin earned a BA in international relations at the University of Arizona, where he learned excellent English. In the U.S., he also developed an abiding interest in American football (especially the Pittsburgh Steelers) -- a passion which sits oddly alongside some fairly dandified mannerisms, like smoking cigarettes with a holder.

¶14. (C) Tahsin was a career diplomat in the "TRNC MFA" from 1983-1991, serving in the Turkish Cypriot office in London from 1986-1991. He was seconded to "Prime Minister" Dervis Eroglu as Under Secretary from 1991-1994, during which time then-UBP leader Eroglu took him under his wing and encouraged him to enter politics. When Eroglu left "government" briefly during the DP-CTP coalition of 1994-6, Ertugruloglu studied

public administration as a Humphrey Fellow at the University of Minnesota (leading some in the pro-settlement camp to joke that his hard-line views were the result of "a U.S. education gone awry").

¶15. (C) Ertugruloğlu returned as Eroğlu's Under Secretary at the "prime ministry" in 1996, and was elected to "parliament" in 1998. He was appointed chairman of the "state" BRT TV/radio network until December 1998, when he became "FM" in Eroğlu's UBP-TKP coalition cabinet. He retained this post in the subsequent UBP-DP coalition, until being replaced as "FM" by his rival from the DP, Serdar Denktash, in 2004. Tahsin was reelected as "MP" from Nicosia in 2003 and 2005 -- although he failed in his subsequent 2005 bid for UBP party leadership, thanks in large part to his aggressive personality and reputation as an unflinching hard-liner. He is married with two children.
Schlicher